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July 20, 2006

Philip Rosedale



Pajamas Media Special Correspondent Andrew Keen presents an in-depth podcast interview with Philip Rosedale, creator of Second Life. Rosedale relates how, since childhood, he was fascinated by the possibility of a second reality in the here and now of the world. Here's how he made it a (cyber)reality, or, as he puts it: "I'm not building a game. I'm building a new country."

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TEXT OF INTERVIEW

Andrew Keen: Welcome to After TV, the show about media culture and technology. Today we're talking with Philip Rosedale, who is the founder of Second Life and the CEO of Linden Labs, the company that runs Second Life. Hi, Philip; thanks for appearing on After TV.

Philip Rosedale: Well thanks for having me; thank you.

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Andrew Keen: So Second Life is obviously a remarkable business and sociological phenomenon; tell us about the origins of it as an idea and as a company in technology.

Philip Rosedale: Well I'd say as an idea it was something that I was excited about since I was a kid. I was a very--I was into electronics and very into building things, taking things apart and programming computers when they came out.

Andrew Keen: Where did you grow up?

Philip Rosedale: I grew up mostly in San Diego, California.

Andrew Keen: Okay.

Philip Rosedale: And I just was a complete tinkerer, nerdy technology kid and so you know for me as soon as I got into using computers, and also having a real interest in physics which is what I went on to study in college, I was really interested in this idea of simulating the world itself, you know and that a simulated space done by computers would be a place that you could make things and do things that you know you could not do.

Andrew Keen: Were you a happy child?

Philip Rosedale: Yeah, definitely; I was the first of four kids and I was--yeah, I think that you know--

Andrew Keen: So your interest in simulation wasn't an escape; it wasn't a retreat from reality?

Philip Rosedale: I would say that I was a shy kid and I was a little nerdy, so I--there's probably a little bit of that in it, but no; I think that I was much more a--even from a young age I was a very kind of metaphysical thinker, so I was just fascinated by like I said the physics of it you know. I would say well what if--what if atoms themselves you know can at some point be just simulated on a computer and what would that be like? And well we know the rules and we



Author of "The Wild  
Parrots of Telegraph Hill"  
*...I usually can't stand to  
listen to myself on the  
radio. But I think that's  
because I usually get  
asked such dreary  
questions. My hat is off...*  
- Mark

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know we can sort of make that happen and you know--wouldn't that be a remarkable place?

**Andrew Keen:** Were you interested in other media growing up as a child--books and movies and that sort of thing?

**Philip Rosedale:** Books more than anything; you know I read a lot as a kid. My mom was an English teacher and she instilled a great--you know tradition of learning through reading.

**Andrew Keen:** What were your favorite books?

**Philip Rosedale:** Well you know a lot of the Russian classics; I think my mom kind of got me into those but I always thought those were--those were so great you know--a lot of you know the Tolstoi and Brothers--

**Andrew Keen:** Even as a child?

**Philip Rosedale:** Even as a child yeah, from pretty young; and in fact I remember kind of along the same lines in a very virtual reality way I can remember just a few years ago kind of getting into that space by reading Proust, you know a Remembrance of Things Past which is this hyper-lucid description, you know 1,200 pages or whatever of a very brief time in this, you know culture of the Last Century and the descriptive language is so acute and so lucid that he uses you--you know you feel as if he's constructing a reality around you and I remember that was at the time that we were working so hard on the technology of Second Life and I was thinking yeah, yeah, you know this is--

**Andrew Keen:** So you were never sort of transfixed or seduced by the--sort of the surreal children's classic--the Alice and Wonderland kind of book?

**Philip Rosedale:** You know I think I read Alice and Wonderland; you know the Chronicles of Narnia actually I can remember reading as a kid. That definitely was fantastic. By the time I got around to reading science fiction I'd say I was already enough of a--kind of a literature snob to feel that it was in most cases

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a bit lacking. I mean I enjoyed I think--I can remember enjoying [Dune] a lot as a kid thinking that Frank Herbert was a pretty--pretty good writer.

Andrew Keen: Did you have a religious upbringing as well?

Philip Rosedale: Well that's an interesting question; I--you know part of my childhood, my dad was a Navy pilot so we moved around a lot and--

Andrew Keen: And that was the--the San Diego bit I suppose.

Philip Rosedale: It--actually I was born in San Diego and then moved around a bit and then came back to San Diego in about fifth grade and was there from then on through college. But one of the times we moved to Southern Maryland and we were way down in Southern Maryland near the Patuxent River which is where there was a Military Base and I can remember my parents were at that time quite religious and I ended up attending for a couple of years a small private Baptist school and I always thought that had a big effect on me. And so I was inspired--this is as a kindergarten and a first and second grader, so I was inspired by the fervor of religion and you know I think there was a time there when I chased people around and asked them if they had been born again and stuff. But you know as I got older I think I you know took that awe into the broader context of well how do things work here and you know how does the universe work and how does the world work [Laughs] and again it probably just made it all the more exciting to me later on to wonder about hey you know can we simulate this all with computers, and ultimately feeling very, very confidently that the answer to that was yes.

Andrew Keen: You've had a pretty interesting career in technology haven't you, I mean before Second Life and Linden Labs.

Philip Rosedale: It's been great.

Andrew Keen: What did you get up to?

Philip Rosedale: Yeah; well you know I started my own little company when I was in high school, helped--you know put myself through college doing that--

-and was writing business database systems, inventory and sales control systems for businesses on a PC and at that time you could write some D-Base, you know you could use D-Base or Fox Pro and write some cool software and compete with mini-computers, which was really interesting. These were the-- this was in the mid-'80s so it was the early days of you know [Ark-Net], you know the old coaxial network.

Andrew Keen: Right.

Philip Rosedale: And so I did that--I came up to San Francisco in the early '90s--in '94 and just fell in love of course, like everyone else--with the Internet. I happened to, you know just be here in San Francisco and had an office on Townsend Street, you know right in the middle of multi-media--right in the middle of the birth of the Internet, and I was immediately struck by the fact that the Internet had the right architecture for building something like Second Life, which by then I had been very passionate about and thinking about for sometime, but--

Andrew Keen: You mean a virtual reality realm?

Philip Rosedale: Yeah, that the fact that the Internet allowed you to connect together many computers in a very lightweight standardized way would mean that we could use many computers on the net to simulate reality. But I was struck by the fact pragmatically, you know as a young businessman that it probably--that the quality of 3-D and the latency of the networks at the time would probably make any attempt to do something like Second Life fail. And indeed, I think if you look at the many excited sort of post no-crash companies of the mid and late-'90s they tried to make it work and it didn't work. I think there were a couple fundamental principles that they missed as well but there was this big you know fact that you just could not make the experience visceral and compelling.

Andrew Keen: Right; well the--I think the problem was the absence of broadband more than anything else wasn't it?

**Philip Rosedale:** Yeah; I think broadband was a key factor--more, more broadband at the level of the latency than the bandwidth. It was the fact that if you touched something in the virtual world and it wanted to touch you back, you know that could not happen in a timeframe that was acceptably interesting and interactive for a human being.

**Andrew Keen:** But there was a lot of investment in virtual reality and 3-D during the boom wasn't there?

**Philip Rosedale:** There was; I think and if I remember correctly it kind of predated the boom. It was more mid-'90s where you got all this kind of post-CD-ROM, early Internet you know let's--you know let's create virtual worlds.

**Andrew Keen:** Who do you see with yourself as being the intellectual founders of virtual reality? I suppose Jaron Lanier would be an important figure.

**Philip Rosedale:** Sure, sure; you know he is definitely, you know one of the pioneer adventurers particularly around the interface and the whole idea of breadth and kind of artistic depth and meaning associated with simulating things.

**Andrew Keen:** He's more of an artist really than a scientist isn't he?

**Philip Rosedale:** I think of him that way; as a friend of mine I think of him more as an artist than as a technologist, although he's certainly great at both and you know he's got a big brain. So he can do just about anything. So who else was at the start of things; well it's funny because I think that when you talk about Second Life and you think about what's making Second Life work today I think you actually can look back at eBay you know as an example of the community and the commerce aspects that are--and then the Internet itself you know that are so key to getting things like this to take off.

**Andrew Keen:** So the success of eBay validated your vision and made you feel more confident that you could pull this thing off?

Philip Rosedale: Absolutely; when we--when we started creating and now bear in mind this was 1999 and then 2000 that we really started working on the software, we were talking about building an environment in which all of the things you would experience would be you know scripted; in other words they'd be interactive pieces of 3-D content that were built by anybody who wandered in and wanted to build them. And that idea, particularly in 2000 was just absolutely ridiculous.

Andrew Keen: I can imagine, especially given the--the pessimism and the cynicism that it sort of developed since the crash or during the crash.

Philip Rosedale: Sure, and as you said you know a number of the early you know 3-D companies were among the airplanes that hit the ground there.

Andrew Keen: So was Linden Labs and--and Second Life, were they self-financed? How did you raise the capital to create the product?

Philip Rosedale: Well initially I funded the company myself; so I had the great fortune both experientially and financially of working at and being one of the early people and one of the Executives at Real Networks.

Andrew Keen: Right, right.

Philip Rosedale: Which was where I went when I felt that Second Life was kind of undoable in '95.

Andrew Keen: Did you ever pitch the Second Life idea to Rob Glaser?

Philip Rosedale: You know I--Rob and I have remained friends and you know were friends all the time that I was there and I definitely told Rob about a lot of the ideas.

Andrew Keen: He seems to have enough of a first life without a need for a second life.

Philip Rosedale: [Laughs] Yeah, yeah; you know and I definitely told him



about these ideas and I'm sure--you know over beers. We never really contemplated any of this stuff; there was no relationship between what I dreamed about doing there and what we were doing at Real Networks.

Andrew Keen: So you left Real Networks and then basically then invested your money and resources and time in building this thing out.

Philip Rosedale: Yeah; I immediately--when I left Real it was--a big reason for taking that step and leaving Real Networks was that broadband had finally come of age and then the other thing was that Nvidia released the G-Force Two and if you remember the G-Force Two was a big moment because it was a graphics co-processor that was highly standardized in the way you could access it and it was definitely going to be at a consumer price-point because it was being pushed out by Nvidia.

Andrew Keen: So very simply, for somebody who has not been on Second Life what is it?

Philip Rosedale: Well it is an online you know three-dimensional virtual world in which you can do--make, do, be, discover anything that you can imagine. And it's--and the reason why it's that way is because everything inside it is made by the people who are there and in fact, the land itself and the space and everything is owned, controlled, and built by the people who are there.

Andrew Keen: So where--is that what you meant when you said I'm not building a game; I'm building a new country?

Philip Rosedale: Well I think that when--when I said that--there is a special thing about Second Life, and let me you know explain that. The Internet in the early '90s was very much life Second Life--that is to say many, many people were entrepreneurially or artistically or just for fun putting things up on web servers; they were deploying all this hardware; they were paying these hosting fees; they were making these wild you know pioneering you know imaginary looks into the future you know putting things on this early



Internet. The same thing is happening now with Second Life, but in three dimensions where people are able to buy this land and build things. And so a lot of times people say well it's like the Internet; Second Life is like the Internet but it's 3-D, and it is very important and meaningful that we've built technology that enables these kinds of, you know Internet like content, user-created content to be built in 3-D, but there's this other thing about Second Life that I'd--I'd like to point out which is the country statement. When you are on Yahoo, when you are browsing Yahoo, you know you are doing it with 100,000 other people or whatever the--you know whatever the large number is of people who are simultaneously accessing Yahoo. You can't communicate with them and you can't see them and you have no sense of their presence. But Second Life because of the fact that part of what matters is that you are you and that you are there is inherently social; you look to the left and the right and you see the other people who are standing at the big church you know that you've just wandered onto in Second Life and you can talk to them. You can say have you been here before.

Andrew Keen: What is the difference though between what you're doing and really a graphical version of a chat room? And after all chat rooms were very popular, particularly in the mid-'90s and the beginning of the Internet boom.

Philip Rosedale: Right, right; what is so different there is that the walls of that room and its meaning and its context and its content and the experience that it delivers are completely under the control of the people that are there or the people that own it. It is possible to be entrepreneurial and commercial if you choose in Second Life, and that's enormously different from the chat room. In essence, the chat room is--it's sort of a more is different kind of an issue. The chat room does freely allow people to exchange information with each other; they have to use text, but it doesn't--but it isn't persistent and it doesn't have the depth of expression and it doesn't have the capacity for the plasticity that we've come to expect from the real world. And as a result, no one is going to entrepreneurially go into a chat room and try to create intellectual property for example, which is what you see happening in Second

Life. So it's not a rich enough space for humans to project into and start doing things that have lasting and you know significant meaning.

Andrew Keen: Is Second Life a game?

Philip Rosedale: No; no it isn't but it is always the nature of new mediums-- instant messaging, the Internet itself, electronic mail--those new mediums are always used initially for play. I think it's--I think that's just an very important thing that people especially entrepreneurs always seem to miss; whenever you build a new technology that no one has experienced that creates a new kind of an expressive medium, the first use that people will make of it is play and novelty, whimsy, vanity, fun, art--that I think is one of the key beliefs that I had and that we as a company had and you know in bringing the people together that you know came together to work on this. We all kind of shared that perspective--that it was going to be fun first. And so that's why people call Second Life a game; it's because the early content that had been built is of course you know whimsical and playful and the people that are making money in Second Life early stage are making money selling kind of game content.

Andrew Keen: If there was a single word to summarize Second Life what would it be?

Philip Rosedale: Well it's kind of a platform, right.

Andrew Keen: But I mean you can describe lots of things as platforms.

Philip Rosedale: Well you could also say it's a place, although it's a very broad kind of place, you know. It doesn't have any--it isn't a place like Tahiti; it's a place more like New York.

Andrew Keen: And for--again for our listeners who are unfamiliar with Second Life, who haven't been to it, could you give us an idea of the number of people inhabiting this place, the number of visitors it has, its growth and that sort of thing?

Philip Rosedale: Right; the number of people who have gotten onto Second Life signed up right now is around 300,000 and it's growing quite rapidly.

Andrew Keen: Now does that cost anything to sign up or can anyone do it?

Philip Rosedale: Well at present it does not; it used to cost something but right now you can you know go to [www.secondlife.com](http://www.secondlife.com) and get an account absolutely for free.

Andrew Keen: Is that--I mean is that a number you're proud of because if you compare it to the sorts of numbers that a place--popular website like [Inaudible] attracts it's not that many?

Philip Rosedale: Second Life is a much more significant--requires a more significant commitment of time right now to understand. Again this is exactly like using Mosaic in 1994. It requires that you commit sufficient time to kind of understand the landscape of the thing; it is a richer experience and therefore you know takes a couple of hours to get used to.

Andrew Keen: Okay; so it's like learning another language in a sense?

Philip Rosedale: Sure and so I'm very proud of that number. It--also as a business I'm very proud of that number. There are about at this point about 30,000 people a day that are using the Second Life--.

Andrew Keen: And of that 300,000 how many people are regular users?

Philip Rosedale: Well there's about 100,000 people if you look at the last 30 days or so.

Andrew Keen: So 100,000 people come regularly?

Philip Rosedale: Yeah.

Andrew Keen: What--to basically live in Second Life, to do their business?

Philip Rosedale: Right; and then there's somewhere around you know--

there's more on the order of 10,000 or so people who are the big landowners that actually--

Andrew Keen: How do you own land on Second Life? Do you have to buy it?

Philip Rosedale: You just buy it.

Andrew Keen: And who do you buy it from?

Philip Rosedale: You buy it generally from other users. You can participate in a land auction and buy it from us as we're putting new servers online but unsurprisingly, Second Life is now about the size of Greater Boston, so just imagine--

Andrew Keen: You mean literally in physical terms?

Philip Rosedale: Yeah, literally; yeah.

Andrew Keen: What does that mean though? I don't understand how it can-- how you can quantify it as a sort of physical geographical sort of equation.

Philip Rosedale: Oh well that's a piece of it--for those who haven't seen Second Life that actually makes it very compelling and very simple. Second Life is a big island; it's all connected together. It's not a bunch of connected rooms; it's not like the Internet. It's not hyperlinked.

Andrew Keen: So it's flat in a sense?

Philip Rosedale: It's flat; there's a map. You can see it on our website even and zoom out just like Google maps and cruise around and you'll see people's boats parked at their docks and you'll see train tracks running through it and you'll see shopping centers and you'll see golf courses.

Andrew Keen: So that island can never get any larger?

Philip Rosedale: No; it's getting larger at its edges all the time. So as new people are coming in and wanting to build new businesses and own property or build a house for themselves they are, you know creating a demand for



land and we meet that demand by putting new servers online. Second Life right now for the technically interested is about 26,000 CPUs, so it's a very substantial amount of physical equipment. As we look forward in the future, like the Internet we see those as being very akin to web servers and we're working on ways to even more rapidly deploy those machines. We're currently putting hundreds of them online every month.

Andrew Keen: So your economic model is selling virtual land; do you have an advertising model?

Philip Rosedale: We have a bit of an advertising model but not in a conventional way. Again, Second Life is a level playing field; everyone owns their own stuff, their own property--there's no way we could just advertise on that property without asking because it isn't ours you know. It belongs to land owners. There is a classified ad system in Second Life that you do pay as an advertiser to use; we make a very small amount of money there. The majority of our money is made in recurring fees--think of them as being like property taxes that you pay when you own land. So it's a bit like a hosting model.

Andrew Keen: So to own land you essentially become a member of the community?

Philip Rosedale: Well yes; I mean you're very much a member of the community when you don't own land but if you own land you basically pay us a recurring fee which is a function of how many acres of land you own.

Andrew Keen: So it's like as you say a property tax?

Philip Rosedale: Yes.

Andrew Keen: But one could conceivably go to Second Life and use it freely if you didn't own land?

Philip Rosedale: And many, many people do and that's what you can do in you know just a few minutes--

Andrew Keen: So the commitment of land is sort of--and again this is sort of a political or a philosophical theme here--once you own land you become a part of the community--it's rather like the pre-democratic era where only landowners really had certain rights.

Philip Rosedale: [Laughs] Although I would strongly--I would strongly say that the power of Second Life and why many of the--if you look at the investors--we have Mitch Kapor, Pierre Omidyar--these are people who are incredibly passionate about doing technology to do social good. Second Life is unquestionably a more leveled playing field in a huge number of ways than the real world.

Andrew Keen: What good does Second Life do socially?

Philip Rosedale: Well it teaches people things; there are women in their 30s and 40s in Second Life who you know were--are now at home with kids and have learned to turn a creative skill into you know a very substantial, you know experience in architecture or have learned to program or are you know--how about a kid in another country in Brazil for example where we have a bunch of users building clothing. So this imagined kid in a cafe in Brazil can craft, can build you know coloring and sculpting and shaping virtual clothing or jewelry, sell it--

Andrew Keen: But let me ask this question and I'm sure this is a question you have to deal with all the time.

Philip Rosedale: Yeah.

Andrew Keen: Why wouldn't that child be building a real shirt or designing a real piece of jewelry? What is the value of investing of then investing that time in something virtual when they could actually be doing it in the real world?

Philip Rosedale: That's a great question. Because they can't in the real world; to make jewelry you have to have a torch and you have to have a shop

↓ "Smileys"

and you might have to have a business license and that's the difference. In Second Life all you need is intellectual capital, persistence, you know entrepreneurship.

Andrew Keen: So will you believe your sort of building another generation of entrepreneurs here?

Philip Rosedale: Absolutely; I think entrepreneurship is a piece of the freedom of expression.

Andrew Keen: Well when people come to their--the really committed, the hard-core members of the community, the people who are spending money on land, are they empire builders? Why are they doing this?

Philip Rosedale: Well I think some of them are--I think you see some of the same questions that you might get of--you know why would people move to the colonies? [Laughs] You know some of them are empire builders.

Andrew Keen: Usually they got thrown out and didn't have much choice.

Philip Rosedale: Yeah; that's right. I guess Second Life is quite a bit different in that sense.

Andrew Keen: You don't--so you're not--you're nothing like Australia and not where the convicts go?

Philip Rosedale: Well I think that there are people who come to Second Life who escape the real world and you know maybe sometimes that motivation is one that they should be examining you know and saying that you know perhaps I would be better off trying to solve the problems I have, say getting along with other people or whatever. But I think the thing that is so powerful about Second Life is that once you get there you are confronted by an environment which demands intellectual persistence and intensity and presence to be successful and you know like the sort of ultimate lemonade stand, if you will. It's in general a learning experience where if you look at you know online video games or something they can often be argued to be



you know less than desirable when compared to real life because they're confronting you with simpler challenges, right which you handle through stereotypes or you handle through very simple activities that do not demand much intellectual rigor.

Andrew Keen: Do you have much crime or social deviance?

Philip Rosedale: Sure.

Andrew Keen: And what happens to those people?

Philip Rosedale: Well a couple of things--Second Life--anything anyone I believe that is interesting--complex enough to be interesting is also complex enough to have crime. We of course have not built crime into Second Life you know. It's not a game, so you can't for example just take someone else's property in Second Life. But you certainly can convince them to give it to you in a way that is say fraudulent. So there is lots of crime, although I--you know I think that it's--the community is extraordinarily self-supporting, so you--there are also many, many people who would help you avoid being a victim of crime. But we have--we as Linden Labs have a set of policies and actions that we will take against people who are criminal. Second Life has the advantage that it has a strong concept of identity; that is to say you have a name in Second Life. It isn't your real life name and that is very, very much anonymous you know. You can--you know you're not sharing that with others but your Second Life name and your reputation and your property and the--your history is a very rich aspect of the world. And so you are not going to be able to just behave in an anonymous you know unappealing way to others without suffering the social consequences of judgment you know. So there are groups in Second Life that will you know--they'll kick you out of their land. You won't be able to go into a city if you will you know--a big area because the people there don't want you anymore. And I think that--that type of social pressure in an environment as accountable and transparent as Second Life is likely to be the emergent governing structures. What we do is relatively simplistic, you know. We behave essentially as a service provider



just as the Federal Government providing a minimal layer of protection for all.

**Andrew Keen:** What comes after Second Life? It's--given the fact that you seem to be simulating reality so effectively, what is the next step in all this?

**Philip Rosedale:** Well that's a big--that's a big question. It strikes me and excites me, you know keeps me very much you know getting up and working on this every day that digital simulation of the world you know with Moore's Law proceeding as inevitably as it has been, you know digital simulation of the world offers significant advantages when compared to, you know the way nature does it if you will. So I think that what happens next is that more and more of human activity particularly intellectual activity becomes concentrated in these simulated worlds. So I believe that what we're doing is going to be global and in scale it already is; we have users from 100 countries I think that we can you know expect to see a tremendous amount of growth. We're going to have to open Second Life up more and more because we think the influx of people trying to use it and create within it is going to overwhelm us you know and it's going to have to be a very broad participant you know set of architectures and standards but I think it's s going to get you know enormous and I think that more and more things from real life if you will are kind of going to get sucked into that.

**Andrew Keen:** Some libertarian Internet thinkers like Glen Reynolds are very much in favor of human beings colonizing Mars as a way of escaping the Earth and creating another reality. Do you see what you're doing as a kind of alternative to the colonization of space?

**Philip Rosedale:** Absolutely; in fact in my blog sometime ago I wrote about just that you know. I remembered that as a kid like many kids I dreamed about traveling into space and then as a pragmatic young guy who had learned physics I knew that it was really going to be a heck of a problem you know and fraught with difficulty and nowhere near as interesting as we could in sort of science fiction imagine it. But you know if you think about space

exploration it is escapist right? You get to leave the world behind and begin again. It is also rich because there is this concept that you don't know what you might find. Anything interesting you find will almost certainly be something you've never seen before. If you think about creating this vast canvass that is the digital simulation of reality and then letting people go into it with the capabilities much--you know much beyond real life that these systems offer I think you've found space. I think it's the kind of inner-space that has exactly the same properties.

**Andrew Keen:** Philip, I want to thank you for really a fascinating interview. Obviously anyone who wants to follow-up should visit Second Life.

**Philip Rosedale:** Absolutely; it's free to get started and you know it will take a few minutes and you'll be dropped into this strange new world that we've been talking about.

**Andrew Keen:** So good luck with your Second Life and thanks again for an extremely interesting interview. I very much appreciate it.

**Philip Rosedale:** Great; thank you. It's been great.

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